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SUBJECT: KARNATAKA HEADED FOR MAY POLLS

REF: Chennai 30 and previous

¶1. (U) Summary: The South India state of Karnataka will hold elections for its legislative assembly before May 28, according to a statement India's Chief Election Commissioner made to reporters on March 28 in Chennai. The precise date of the elections has not been set, but earlier reports suggest that they will take place between May 9 and 18. The state has been administered by a New Delhi-appointed governor since the collapse of the state's elected government in November 2007. This six-month term of "President's Rule" will end on May 28. All three of the state's major parties have told us in recent weeks that they expect to do well enough to form the next government. It is difficult to say whether these predictions are based on wishful thinking, pre-election bluster or realistic assessment, but at least one of these parties is likely to be disappointed. End Summary.

Karnataka's election chief makes announcement  
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¶2. (SBU) India's Chief Election Commissioner told reporters on March 28 in Chennai that elections in Karnataka will take place before May 28. He also told the reporters that he would announce the precise dates of the polls "within a couple of days." Evasively sourced press reports suggest that they will take place between May 9 and 18, and a high-level Karnataka bureaucrat told us to expect the elections to take place around the second week of May. (The law requires that the official poll dates be announced at least 30 days before the elections take place.)

¶3. (U) Karnataka has been administered by the state's Governor since the collapse of the state's elected government in November 2007. This six-month term of "President's Rule," approved by the central government and parliament, will end on May 28. President's Rule can be extended for additional six-month periods, if approved by parliament (reftels).

Karnataka election commission revises electoral rolls  
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¶4. (U) The Karnataka State Chief Electoral Officer announced on March 14 completion of "delimitation" of all 224 assembly constituencies in the state (a process analogous to redistricting in the U.S. political context). This process was completed much more rapidly than some observers had originally predicted, taking only weeks instead of months.

Congress resigns itself to early elections  
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¶5. (SBU) Reluctant initially to face the electorate in May, the Congress Party's leadership in Karnataka now seems resigned to early elections. One state leader criticized the methods used during the delimitation process but admitted that challenging it in the courts would be difficult. He also said, however, that elections would end President's Rule in the state, which was unpopular and a liability for Congress. Another state party leader told us that he expects

Congress to head the state's next government. (Comment: The Congress Party nationally, however, has been weakened by an onslaught of bad news on inflation and financial markets as well as a pounding from the BJP on the right and the Communist parties on issues as varied as the state of the agricultural sector, Tibet, terrorism, and national security. The party is not keen to go to the polls in such an unfavorable environment. End comment.)

BJP hopes to win majority  
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¶6. (SBU) A former state Industries Minister and BJP leader told us firmly that the party will win a majority in the next assembly. He ruled out the possibility of forming a coalition government, stating adamantly that his party would be in the opposition if it failed to win an absolute majority of seats in the state's legislative assembly. (Comment: The state party also believes it has the sympathy of many voters due to its betrayal at the hands of its former coalition partner, the JD(S), see reftels. End comment.)

JD(S) also upbeat  
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¶7. (SBU) Similarly, the Janata Dal (Secular), JD(S) -- the state's other main party -- sees bright prospects in recent political developments. One of the party's key leaders told us that the JD(S) would benefit from the delimitation process, but remained vague on the details. He also said that the party has strengthened its base in the rural areas of the state during the 20 months that H.D. Kumaraswamy was the Chief Minister. He opined that the recent inroads in the state by Mayawati's BSP would draw votes away from both the BJP and Congress, putting the JD(S) in an excellent position to win a plurality of legislative assembly seats.

BSP: up-and-coming, but not yet  
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¶8. (SBU) P.G.R. Sindhia, the Karnataka-based national General Secretary for the BSP, told us that his party would play only a

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minor role in this election. He noted, however, that the delimitation process raised the number of seats reserved for lower castes in Karnataka's 225-member assembly from 35 to 51, increasing the opportunity for the party to play a more important role in the state. He predicted that the party may only get 15 seats in the upcoming elections but that it will pursue a strategy in Karnataka similar to what it has pursued elsewhere (creating coalitions of lower-caste and high-caste voters), which will result in the party becoming a serious electoral force in the state in the next election cycle. (Comment: The BSP has failed to make any inroads in other states after its stunning election triumph in Uttar Pradesh last May. Its short-term prospects seem dim in Karnataka but, as it did in Gujarat, it may attract enough lower-caste votes to tip the balance against the Congress Party in some constituencies. End comment.)

Comment  
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¶9. (SBU) For the first time in months, all of the relevant political actors seem to agree on the next step in Karnataka's political future, namely that elections will occur in May, and the announcement of the Chief Election Commissioner -- the country's highest authority on election matters -- makes this clear. The lack of reliable polling data, however, prevents analysts from doing any more than guessing about the results of the upcoming elections. That is not stopping the state's political leaders from waxing poetic about their chances for electoral success. Given that the BJP has been pushing hard for elections as soon as possible while Congress has been doing its best to delay them, however, it seems that the BJP is more confident about its prospects.

¶10. (SBU) The eyes of India's political-watchers are now on Karnataka. After suffering crushing losses in Gujarat, Himachal and humbling defeats in Nagaland, Tripura and Meghalaya, the Congress Party is looking for some opportunity to revive itself before national elections. Another loss for the Congress Party to add to its string of defeats in 2007 and 2008 would be demoralizing for the

party's supporters. A win for the BJP, however, would further add to its national momentum.

11. (U) This message was coordinated with Embassy New Delhi.

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